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ABSTRACT

Thirty-six children with poor learning skills were identified in an infants school by using D. Stott's experimental Guide to the Child's Learning Skills (GCLS). The children were allocated to three groups of 12, two of which had intervention teaching programs while the third was left as a comparison group. Pre and post test results showed that learning skills had improved in all 36 children, which may indicate that the use of the GCLS affects teachers' awareness of the students' needs. Further inspection of the intervention programs showed different effects according to the experiences provided for the students. (Author/SBH)

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PANEL 15 : 'The Impact of Early Intervention on Learning'

CHAIR: Denis H. Stott.

IMPROVING CHILDREN'S LEARNING SKILLS: classroom implications arising from a short-term intervention programme in an Infants School.

By Len Green and Jean Francis

Summary: In this paper we discuss some implications for the classroom, following a study which was undertaken in an Infants School in East London, England. Thirty-six children with 'poor' learning skills were identified by using Stott's experimental Guide to the Child's Learning Skills (GCLS). The children were allocated to three groups of twelve, two of which had intervention teaching programmes while the third was left as a comparison group. Pre and post test results showed that learning skills had improved in all thirty-six children; this may indicate that the use of the GCLS affects teachers' awareness of the needs of the pupils in their charge. Further inspection of the intervention programmes shows different effects according to the experiences provided for the pupils.

Introduction

The Plowden Report[1] of 1967 developed the concept of Educational Priority Areas and defined them as being 'areas which, among other things, are characterised by such features as a relatively high incidence of low family income, large families, poor housing and overcrowding, poor school attendance and truancy'. The programme reported here was carried out by the headteacher of a Junior School (pupils' age range 7-11yrs) in its feeder Infant School (pupils' age range 5-7yrs) within such an area in East London, England. It may be regarded as an example of the contribution which practising teachers can make by field work in their own schools.
The objectives of the investigation were:-

(i) to identify inappropriate learning behaviours which may be hindering the processes of learning in school;

(ii) to test the effects of two teaching programmes.

(i) Identifying inappropriate learning behaviours

The class teachers observed their pupils' behaviour during learning situations in school. For each child, the teacher completed Stott's new Preliminary Screening Guide to the Child's Learning Skills[2].
The seven statements on this Preliminary Screening Guide were experimental at that stage, the final version being developed as follows:-

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Shows by his answers that he is giving attention.
Settles down well at an activity that needs some concentration.
Copes with something new without getting nervous or upset.
Is willing to fall in with the general activities of the class.
Is willing to try on his own.
Accepts help when he cannot manage a task.
Is an alert child who enters into activities with interest.

These seven statements are scored 0,1 or 2 according to whether the teacher considers that each one 'certainly applies', 'applies sometimes' or 'doesn't apply'. From this screening, children with the highest scores are considered to have the poorest learning skills.

(ii) The two teaching programmes

PROGRAMME ONE - The Flying Start, Learning to Learn Kit[3]: developed by Denis Stott at the Centre for Learning Disabilities, University of Guelph, Canada.

Dr Stott challenges most strongly the concept of 'intelligence' and the resulting categorization of children. He has found many children who were retarded because 'their general style of behaviour prevents them from attending or working at anything for long'[4]. Stott has observed that only a minority of children spontaneously develop really effective learning habits; many other children, after becoming bewildered and frustrated, turn to guessing or prefer to avoid anything which appears to be difficult.

The Flying Start Kit is based on the idea that, for such children, it is not enough to provide a rich environment or opportunities for creative play; its main purpose is deliberately to develop and reinforce good learning skills. The Kit is a set of non-expendable, game-like activities which encourage the distractible child to pay attention, the impulsive child to think things out, and the unresponsive child to participate - each acquiring a mental set of 'I can do it' which motivates further efforts for learning.

PROGRAMME TWO - Picture Books[5]: developed by Joan Tough in England for the Schools Council Project on Communication Skills in Early Childhood.

After a longitudinal study of children's use of language, Dr Tough became concerned to examine alternative ways for developing communication skills in young children in school. Of particular concern were the needs of children who are disadvantaged within school because of their experiences of using language at home. The Project is concerned for links between language and learning in early childhood, for the focussing of attention and for the development of meaning.

The Picture Books are two series of pictures which the teacher may use with the child; firstly, to help the child to demonstrate his range of language skills; and secondly, to help the child to interpret pictures and recognize the sequence of a story. By interpreting the pictures and discussing them with the teacher the child's language abilities are developed through meaningful activity.

The children in the investigation

The original sample consisted of all 91 children (51 boys and 40 girls) from three classes in the Infants School within the age ranges 66 - 78 months. From these, by the use of the Preliminary Screening Guide to the Child's Learning Skills, 36 children were selected for further study on the basis of having scored most adversely on the screening schedule. They were then allocated to three comparable groups according to sex, age and adverse score.

Group A, consisting of 6 boys and 6 girls, was given a teaching programme using the Flying Start materials. They were withdrawn in groups of 4 (2 boys and 2 girls) over a period of ten weeks; each group being withdrawn for half an hour a week.

Group B, also consisting of 6 boys and 6 girls, was given a teaching programme from Joan Tough's Picture Books. The same teaching procedures were adopted as for Group A.

Group C, was not given extra help outside of the classroom and the 6 boys and 6 girls formed a comparison group.

The tests used and the results

Before and after the ten week teaching programmes, the 36 children were individually tested using a modified form of Raven's Progressive Coloured Matrices and the Harris-Goodenough 'Draw a Man' test. The Raven's Progressive Coloured Matrices involve the use of observational and matching skills using shapes, colours and patterns; while the Draw a Man test involves the perception and interpretation of human physical characteristics.

On the Raven's test, Group A which used the Flying Start Programme showed a greater pre-post training improvement than the other two groups. This improvement would appear to be related to the intervention programme which may have increased the children's awareness of detail and their visual perception.

On the Draw a Man test, Group B which used the Picture Books language programme showed the greatest improvement. One could suggest that this improved score of Group B was due to the use of paper and pencil for drawing while the children were waiting their turn in the language sessions and also to the researcher's questioning when using the Picture Books which concentrated awareness of human physical characteristics.

On Stott's Guide to the Child's Learning Skills, both of the groups which had been given intervention programmes greatly improved in their scores for learning behaviour. However, an unexpected result was the comparable improvement of Group C which had not been withdrawn for extra teaching.

Implications

Arising from these findings, in connection with the teaching programmes and the screening guide, we consider that there may be implications for a) individual children; b) the class as a whole; c) class teachers; and d) teacher education.

a) Individual children

We have found, in this study and in others, that the use of intervention programmes which are concerned for children's learning skills seems to have early 'spin-off' effects in the classroom situation. Children such as Paul, whose case study is included in Stott (1978), seem to shed their apprehension and disruptive behaviour once they become willing to try new tasks. We have observed the effects of such attitude change on the part of the child to include:-

- less need to assume the role of 'dullness';
- a development of interest and concentration upon learning tasks;
- an increased self esteem, together with a change from 'I can't/won't do it' to an 'I can do it' approach; and
- greater acceptance of the child into the classroom situation by both the teacher and the other pupils.

In this way, there begins a developing pattern of achievement.

Our experience has shown that, for many children in a failing situation in school, a similar pattern of achievement may be initiated from the use of carefully structured programmes in basic subjects; but that such an approach may have little effect for some children.

An example of this could be illustrated by a child we knew some years ago, Heather; a ten-year-old whose behaviour had long been so impulsive and hostile that, before the age of eight, she had been excluded from three different Infants Schools. She was placed in a full-time Remedial Centre where her hostility and bullying seemed to overwhelm not only the other children but also the staff, especially the ancillary staff. The response to this problem on the part of the remedial teachers was to drill Heather in reading skills, especially phonics, until her reading age was high enough to warrant her return to an ordinary primary school. However, this approach, while resulting in an improved reading score, did not change the child's inadequate learning behaviour. Once back in the ordinary school, Heather continued to be disruptive, disgruntled and hostile - a very real problem.

Observations in the classroom showed that Heather's biggest problem seemed to be one of disorganization and lack of concentration. For instance, when using ready mixed paints she seemed unable to replace the brushes in the right pot, even though she used only one at a time; also, when engaged in any kind of written work she would be frequently distracted from her task but return after a while to resume work with any pens, pencils, books etc within her reach - thus, the work of the group around her would grind to a halt through muddled curriculum materials, lost pens, etc. Such disorganization was part of her behaviour, no matter what she was doing, causing frustration and resentment from the other pupils and her teachers.

The use of the Flying Start materials was a tremendous help to this child. At the beginning, even the two piece puzzles presented difficulties for her but, once she had developed the necessary skills of attending and concentrating, her progress was rapid. Soon, these learning experiences were affecting her other activities and her class teacher was reporting a child who was participating successfully in the school situation and that Heather seemed much happier. This factor of happiness, or a brighter spirit, may perhaps be one which is useful to note in children who are helped to achieve more effective learning skills. We have found that there are some children with learning difficulties who, because they cannot diagnose the situation for themselves, will need help in developing appropriate learning behaviours.

b) The class as a whole

In this study we found a notable improvement in the test results of all three groups of children, including the 'no-treatment' group, and surmised that some kind of Hawthorne effect may have operated on the latter.

Our interest is therefore aroused by Stott's comments (1978, pp 132-133) that improvement of work attitudes of a whole class may result from the withdrawal of a minority group for only a short period each week. He mentions that the children who are given intervention programmes may cease to be models of distractibility and despondency, thereby improving the class atmosphere for everybody. Certainly, we are aware of the amount of stress which can be caused by anti-social behaviour related to poor learning skills. We have found much successful 'remedial' teaching to be linked with the improved self-image of children who have been given extra attention.

Perhaps an approach which concentrates on the development of skills for coping with learning tasks could benefit not only the children who are withdrawn but also the other pupils in the classroom.

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with some of the distractible and despondent pupils withdrawn, even for a short while, the teacher's attention will be less thinly spread and the whole class could benefit. However, we are aware of the dangers which have been linked with the withdrawal of children, especially where it could depress their self-esteem or lower expectations. This brings us to consider that, while withdrawal may be suitable for some children, such provision should be made according to the observed needs and personality of each individual child.

c) Class teachers

Teachers who are concerned for the progress of the children in their charge may, at times, feel insecure about the way to help particular pupils who are showing signs of learning difficulties. We find that Stott's Preliminary Screening Guide can be helpful, in that it can be filled in quickly and seems to be meaningful to teachers.

The seven statements on the Preliminary Screening Guide illuminate facets of behaviour which have long been of concern to teachers. By stating them clearly, the Guide seems to focus attention upon individual children in a meaningful and beneficial manner; this seems to be so, whether there is general approval or reservation about screening devices. Therefore, a valid contribution to teachers' awareness and observation of children can be made. Observations made in this way usually show most children to be making satisfactory progress and this gives considerable positive feedback to teachers for the tasks which they undertake. But for some children, not necessarily the same pupils each time, such screening will show some unacceptable situations, with very little effective learning taking place.

d) Teacher education

Having noted specific areas of need from the careful observation of individual pupils, the teacher is likely to ask for further assistance in defining what can be done in 'unacceptable situations'. It is sometimes only too easy to note that something is wrong, that somewhere there is a mis-match, but this does not explain how situations may be rectified.

As we see it, two related implications arise for teacher education, both initial and in-service. The first is the need to develop teachers' skills for considering the curriculum as a whole. Given some indication of the aims of education during the compulsory years of schooling, teachers may be assisted to consider whether that part of the curriculum for which they are responsible can be justified - both in relation to the long-term educational aims and, also, in relation to the stages of development of the pupils.

Secondly, it would seem that more help is needed for teachers to find suitable methods of observation for the curriculum as it is experienced by each individual child. Only in this way shall educationists be able to work towards reducing the numbers of children who are caused much stress by the use of inappropriate learning skills.

Conclusion

In presenting this short-term study of screening and intervention programmes, we are aware that the effects for the pupils may be short-term. However, a follow-up study is envisaged as the children proceed through the Junior School. One encouraging aspect of the study was that school-based research was carried out, not only within the school but by the staff itself.

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